

Surrey Centre for Professional Training and Education

Assessing in the professional/training environment

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Some challenges

There are a number of challenges associated with assessment of student performance in professional environments. These are not peculiar to such environments, since they exist in 'standard' assessment practice although they are not always clearly recognized. It is the fluidity of the professional environment that makes it challenging to capture and report performance with an appropriate robustness.

Standards and thresholds

The specification of standards is a longstanding problem, despite the contribution of the subject benchmarks¹ produced under the auspices of the QAA. There is a small literature that shows that terms in common use, such as 'analysis', are variably understood and used in assessment practice.

In professional environments there is a need to determine a threshold of acceptable performance. This is at its sharpest when issues of public safety arise, such as in the areas of health and education. In such areas, 'compensation' for a weak aspect of performance may not be tolerable. In others, it may be possible to take a more rounded view of the student's achievement.

Technical considerations

The criteria of technical quality in assessment are dominated by validity and reliability with the latter being construed primarily in psychometric terms. Assessments in the professional environment tend not to lend themselves to the statistical judgements of reliability that are often made. Concepts proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1989) from a constructive perspective, such as credibility, transferability and dependability may have more to offer, but probably do not fit with conventional approaches to marking and grading.

Cumulation of assessments

Discussions by the Burgess Group regarding the honours degree classification have pointed (not all that clearly) to the problem of reaching an overall judgement of a student's achievements in which various kinds of assessments have been undertaken. Some kinds of assessment do not lend themselves to a technically sound mark or grade which can be included in the method of determining an honours degree classification – for example, sandwich placement has proved difficult to accommodate.

¹ These are not standards as such, but are intended to be helpful to curriculum designers in determining appropriate standards.

Communication to interested parties

Again stemming from the Burgess Group's view that the honours degree classification is no longer fit for purpose, a major issue in assessment is how students' achievements should be communicated to interested parties (employers are probably uppermost in thinking here, but they are of course not the only interested party). Following the *Dearing Report* and the *Bologna Declaration*, the provision of disaggregated aggregation is becoming a feature of UK higher education that is represented in student transcripts and the *Diploma Supplement*. However, transcripts and the *Diploma Supplement* do not in themselves deal fully with the 'communication challenge'.

Education of assessors

The *Dearing Report* chided the sector for not doing more to train academics in the assessment of student achievement. This was perhaps rather unfair, since the Dearing Committee probably did not appreciate how few in the sector possesses specialist expertise in assessment, and hence that this would compromise developmental activity. Whilst it is probably fair to suggest that the situation has improved since 1997, there is probably still a long way to go in developing assessment expertise across the sector as far as 'traditional' assessment is concerned. There is probably rather further to go in respect of the assessment of achievement in professional environments.

References

Guba EG and Lincoln YS (1989) *Fourth generation evaluation*. London: Sage.

Yorke M (2005) *Issues in the assessment of practice-based professional learning*. At www.open.ac.uk/cetl/pbpl/links/MYNov05.pdf .

Some questions

The short paragraphs above point to a considerable number of questions, amongst them the following:

- How can threshold levels of acceptable performance be specified and shared with those involved in the assessment process?
- How can the robustness of assessments undertaken in the professional environment be demonstrated?
- How should student achievements from different segments of their programmes of study be communicated to interested parties?

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Mantz is Visiting Professor in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University.

He began his career in school teaching and teacher education at Manchester Polytechnic before moving into staff development, educational research and institutional management at Liverpool Polytechnic.

Between 1993-95 he was seconded as Director of Quality Enhancement at the Higher Education Quality Council. He returned to Liverpool John Moores University as Director of the Centre for Higher Education Development, with a brief to research aspects of institutional performance, in which 'the student experience' was prominent.

From 2002-5 he was a member of the HEFCE-funded Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team [ESECT], and is currently general editor for the Higher Education Academy's series 'Learning and Employability'. He is co-director of a project on students' first year experience, which is funded by the Higher Education Academy.

He has published widely on higher education, his recent work focusing on assessment, employability, and student success in general. Of particular interest to us is his work of the Open University Centre for Excellence for Practice Based Professional Learning. In 2005 he undertook a major literature review of assessment in professional practice-based settings and he will be drawing on the findings of this work in his presentation.